

BEETHOVEN: Diabelli Variations

with *Piano Sonata 17*

John Browning—MSR 1122—73 minutes

with *Sonata 27*

Daniel Shapiro—Azica 71234—68 minutes

with variations by others

Melvin Chen, p—Bridge 9189—67 minutes

No sooner do I complete a review of two Diabelli Variations than three more appear. In this case both Browning and Shapiro time out

American Record Guide

about the same. Chen is about six minutes longer. All three are in direct competition with several other excellent performances. MSR's John Browning recording dates from an Austin, Texas performance in 1965 and is not in stereo.

Browning is recorded in an attractive ambiance with sound reasonably full, if a bit muffled. While the pianist competes with his own studio recording on RCA Victor, that recording (never issued on CD) was uncomfortably brittle in sound. This easily surpasses it, and followers of the pianist need not hesitate in purchasing the new one for their collections.

Those just seeking a superlative performance of the Diabelli should be forewarned that the dynamism and contrast Beethoven built into the music is often negated by Browning. In an effort to keep everything on an even keel we have a smoothing out of rhythm and volume. Where we want some feathers to be ruffled, as in the cross-rhythms of Variation 19, the excitement is missing. By contrast, Daniel Shapiro takes us on a voyage of discovery in this variation and is willing to wander more closely to the edge of the cliff. Variation 23 is yet another example of Shapiro's more exciting approach to the music.

Browning seems to gain steam as the work progresses; he and Shapiro show sympathy for and understanding of the slower variations. Shapiro's interpretation has all the contrast and spontaneity one associates with Beethoven's genius. His notes are also revealing of his love and awe for Beethoven's magnum opus in variation form. It is surprising to find that this is the pianist's first solo release.

Melvin Chen was born in Tennessee. He holds a doctorate in chemistry from Harvard and a double master's degree from the Juilliard School in both piano and violin. If this were not impressive enough, Chen can boast of studies with Boris Berman and Ida Kavafian. His Diabelli is intellectual, smart, and pretty darn impressive. He contrasts the individual variations very well and is more than willing to play slowly, softly, and expressively, with some beautifully executed ritardandos and rubato. Above all, Chen sees the variations in context of the entire work. His performance registers as the most interesting of the three.

Like the well known adage that you can't eat just one potato chip, it is difficult to live with just one *Diabelli Variations* once you've been hooked. While there is no "best" performance, Shapiro certainly joins the handful at the top. His coupling is the composer's Sonata 27. Its two movements draw their sustenance from one of Beethoven's greatest creative periods, and Shapiro knows how to shape the music and bring out the contrast between its

various elements. It is a profound performance and one that helps renew acquaintance with the composer's genius. Chen, on the other hand, secures a place just slightly above Shapiro in that handful on top. His Diabelli easily qualifies for that rarefied niche of performances that can be termed "classic".

Browning's coupling is Sonata 17 (Op. 31:2), the so-called *Tempest*. In the outer movements he brews quite a storm and keeps things moving along with great clarity. Some will be troubled by his avoidance of repeats, but this is not a critical element for many. Judged on its own merit the performance has an impetuosity that is most attractive. In competition with a legion of others, it achieves a position somewhere in the middle of the pile.

Chen's coupling, at some seven minutes, is less generous in timing than the others. Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles, Liszt, Schubert, and Czerny have all contributed a variation on Diabelli's Waltz. As the fine annotator indicates, they are "slight". Still, their inclusion here is most enterprising. I only wish a few more had been chosen.

BECKER